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The FAST Way to Get Traffic Moving

A familiar headline appeared in The Post this spring: "Va. Backs Off Plans for 2 Road Projects." Despite ever worsening traffic, plans for widening I-66 in Arlington and developing a new beltway are back on the shelf. The reason? Lack of funds. According to Virginia Transportation Commissioner Philip Shucet, "the one thing we know is, absent some dramatic change on the revenue side, we are not able to pay for these."

I'd like to offer you that dramatic change. It's found in a bipartisan bill I introduced with Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.) called the FAST (Freeing Alternatives for Speedy Transportation) Act. It would bring fundamental and long-overdue reform to America's transportation system by adopting a model that is working in the states and around the world.

Our approach is simple, straightforward and fair. It repeals an outdated 1958 provision in law that prevents fee-based financing on the interstate highways, but with three critical caveats that promote fiscal responsibility and restore driver confidence: (1) All fees will be collected electronically -- no tolls, no tollbooths. (2) The revenue

can be collected only on new lanes and spent only on those new lanes. (3) Once the revenue collected pays for the new lanes, the fees expire.

The FAST Act's benefits are many. Every driver will benefit when FAST lanes are constructed. Those who use them will have new lanes, while those who choose not to will benefit from having fewer cars in the existing lanes. FAST fees represent a true user fee. They are voluntary. No one will be forced to use the lanes. Drivers can decide for themselves whether it's worth it to them to pay a fee to get where they are going faster. It opens a new revenue stream.

Our approach empowers states to solve their own problems. No longer will they be forced to come to Congress every time they need to expand an interstate. And projects get completed faster using FAST lanes; when roads are built more quickly, they cost less and get people moving sooner.

Congested metropolitan areas would no longer absorb a disproportionate share of transportation dollars under this legislation. FAST lanes would free critical dollars for additional priorities, so there would be a more even distribution of funds, and high

-dollar projects wouldn't soak up a state's entire transportation budget.

It would be good for the environment. States and localities could opt for congestion pricing, by which fees would change according to the traffic flow. Prices could be set to keep traffic moving, which leads to cleaner air, because cars aren't stuck idling. It would also improve transit options, as the ability to maintain a consistent schedule makes bus rapid transit viable.

Finally, and perhaps most important, FAST would restore lost public confidence. Referendums such as the one in Northern Virginia fail because the public doesn't trust the government to spend the money properly. Our provisions preventing funds from being diverted to other projects and ensuring that the fees expire in time will restore that lost confidence.

It's time to move beyond the old debates and give Americans the 21st century transportation system they deserve.

The writer is a Republican representative from Minnesota.